

‘Homer’s Contest’

If we speak of *humanity*, it is on the basic assumption that it should be that which *separates* man from nature and is his mark of distinction. But in reality there is no such separation: ‘natural’ characteristics and those called specifically ‘human’ have grown together inextricably. Man, at the finest height of his powers, is all nature and carries nature’s uncanny dual character in himself. His dreadful capabilities and those counting as inhuman are perhaps, indeed, the fertile soil from which alone all humanity, in feelings, deeds and works, can grow forth.

Thus the Greeks, the most humane people of ancient time, have a trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure in destruction, in them: a trait which is even clearly visible in Alexander the Great, that grotesquely enlarged reflection of the Hellene, and which, in their whole history, and also their mythology, must strike fear into us when we approach them with the emasculated concept of modern humanity. When Alexander has the feet pierced of the brave defender of Gaza, Batis, and ties his live body to his chariot in order to drag him around to the scorn of his own soldiers:¹ this is a nauseating caricature of Achilles, who abused the corpse of Hector at night by similarly dragging it around; but for us, even Achilles’ action has something offensive and horrific about it. Here we look into the bottomless pit of hatred. With the same sensation, we observe the bloody and insatiable mutual laceration of two Greek factions, for example in the Corcyrean revolution.² When, in a battle between cities, the victor, according to the *rights* of war, puts the whole male population to the sword

¹ Cf. Jacoby, F, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden, 1940–1), 142.5.

² Thucydides III.70–85.

and sells all the women and children into slavery, we see, in the sanctioning of such a right, that the Greek regarded a full release of his hatred as a serious necessity; at such moments pent-up, swollen sensation found relief: the tiger charged out, wanton cruelty flickering in its terrible eyes. Why did the Greek sculptor repeatedly have to represent war and battles with endless repetition, human bodies stretched out, their veins taut with hatred or the arrogance of triumph, the wounded doubled up, the dying in agony? Why did the whole Greek world rejoice over the pictures of battle in the *Iliad*? I fear we have not understood these in a sufficiently 'Greek' way, and even that we would shudder if we ever did understand them in a Greek way.

But what lies *behind* the world of Homer, as the womb of everything Hellenic? In the *latter*, we are already lifted beyond the purely material fusion by the extraordinary artistic precision, calmness and purity of the lines: its colours, through an artistic deception, seem lighter, gentler and warmer, its people, in this warm, multi-coloured light, seem better and more likeable – but where do we look if we stride backwards into the pre-Homeric world, without Homer's guiding and protecting hand? Only into night and horror, into the products of a fantasy used to ghastly things. What earthly existence is reflected in these repellingly dreadful legends about the origins of the gods: a life ruled over by the *children of the night* alone, by strife, lust, deception, age and death. Let us imagine the air of Hesiod's poems, difficult to breathe as it is, still thicker and darker and without any of the things to alleviate and cleanse it which poured over Hellas from Delphi and numerous seats of the gods: let us mix this thickened Boeotian air with the dark voluptuousness of the Etruscans; such a reality would then *extort* from us a world of myths in which Uranus, Kronos and Zeus and the struggles of the Titans would seem like a relief; in this brooding atmosphere, combat is salvation and deliverance, the cruelty of the victory is the pinnacle of life's jubilation. And just as, in truth, the concept of Greek law developed out of *murder* and atonement for murder, finer culture, too, takes its first victor's wreath from the altar of atonement for murder. The wake of that bloody period stretches deep into Hellenic history. The names of Orpheus, Musaeus and their cults, reveal what were the conclusions to which a continual exposure to a world of combat and cruelty led – to nausea at existence, to the view of existence as a punishment to be discharged by serving out one's time, to the belief that existence and indebtedness were identical. But precisely these conclusions are not specifically Hellenic: in them, Greece meets India and the

Orient in general. The Hellenic genius had yet another answer ready to the question 'What does a life of combat and victory want?', and gives this answer in the whole breadth of Greek history.

In order to understand it, we must assume that Greek genius acknowledged the existing impulse, terrible as it was, and regarded it as *justified*: whereas in the Orphic version there lay the thought that a life rooted in such an impulse was not worth living. Combat and the pleasure of victory were acknowledged: and nothing severs the Greek world so sharply from ours as the resultant *colouring* of individual ethical concepts, for example *Eris* and *envy*.

When the traveller Pausanias visited the Helicon on his travels through Greece, an ancient copy of the Greeks' first didactic poem, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, was shown to him, inscribed on lead plates and badly damaged by time and weather.³ But he still saw this much, that in contrast to the usual copies it did not carry that little hymn to Zeus at the head, but began straight with the assertion: 'There are *two* Eris-goddesses on earth'.⁴ This is one of the most remarkable of Hellenic ideas and deserves to be impressed upon newcomers right at the gate of entry to Hellenic ethics. 'One should praise the one Eris as much as blame the other, if one has any sense; because the two goddesses have quite separate dispositions. One promotes wicked war and feuding, the cruel thing! No mortal likes her, but the yoke of necessity forces man to honour the heavy burden of this Eris according to the decrees of the Immortals. Black Night gave birth to this one as the older of the two; but Zeus, who reigned on high, placed the other on the roots of the earth and amongst men as a much better one. She drives even the unskilled man to work; and if someone who lacks property sees someone else who is rich, he likewise hurries off to sow and plant and set his house in order; neighbour competes with neighbour striving for prosperity. This Eris is good for men. Even potters harbour grudges against potters, carpenters against carpenters, beggars envy beggars and minstrels envy minstrels.'⁵

The two last verses, about *odium figulinum*,⁶ seem to our scholars incomprehensible in this place. In their judgment, the predicates 'grudge' and 'envy' fit only the nature of the bad Eris; and for this reason they make no bones about declaring the verses not genuine or accidentally trans-

³ Pausanias IX.31.4.

⁴ In the received text, this is line 11.

⁵ Hesiod, *Works & Days* 12-26.

⁶ 'potters' hatred'.

posed here. But another ethic, not a Hellenic one, must have inspired them to this: for Aristotle makes no objection to referring these verses to the good Eris.⁷ And not just Aristotle, but the whole of Greek antiquity thinks about grudge and envy differently from us and agrees with Hesiod, who first portrays one Eris as wicked, in fact the one who leads men into hostile struggle-to-the-death, and then praises the other Eris as good who, as jealousy, grudge and envy, goads men to action, not, however, the action of a struggle-to-the-death but the action of the *contest*. The Greek is *envious* and does not experience this characteristic as a blemish, but as the effect of a *benevolent* deity: what a gulf of ethical judgment between him and us! Because he is envious, he feels the envious eye of a god resting on him whenever he has an excessive amount of honour, wealth, fame and fortune, and he fears this envy; in this case, the god warns him of the transitoriness of the human lot, he dreads his good fortune and, sacrificing the best part of it, he prostrates himself before divine envy. This idea does not estrange his gods at all from him: on the contrary, their significance is made manifest, which is that man, whose soul burns with jealousy of every other living thing, *never* has the right to compete with them. In Thamyris' fight with the Muses, Marsyas' with Apollo, in the moving fate of Niobe,⁸ there appeared the terrible opposition of the two forces that ought never to fight one another, man and god.

However, the greater and more eminent a Greek man is, the brighter the flame of ambition to erupt from him, consuming everyone who runs with him on the same track. Aristotle once made a list of such hostile contests in the grand style: amongst them is the most striking example of how even a dead man can excite a living man to consuming jealousy.⁹ Indeed, that is how Aristotle describes the relationship of the Kolophonian Xenophanes to Homer. We do not understand the strength of this attack on the national hero of poetry unless we construe the root of the attack to be the immense desire to take the place of the fallen poet and inherit his fame, as later with Plato, too. Every great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue strikes the spark of a new grandeur. If the young Themistocles could not sleep at the thought of Miltiades' laurels,¹⁰ his early-awakened urge found release only in the long rivalry with

⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1388a16, 1381b16–17; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a35–b1.

⁸ Three cases of humans who tried unsuccessfully to compete with the gods, Thamyris and Marsyas in artistic accomplishment and Niobe in philo-progenitiveness.

⁹ Aristotle, *Fragments*, ed. Ross, 7 (from Diogenes Laertius II.5.46).

¹⁰ Plutarch, 'Life of Themistocles', ch. 3.

Aristides, when he developed that remarkable, purely instinctive genius for political action which Thucydides describes for us.¹¹ How very typical is the question and answer, when a notable opponent of Pericles is asked whether he or Pericles is the best wrestler in the city and answers: 'Even if I throw him he denies having fallen and gets away with it, persuading the people who saw him fall.'¹²

If we want to see that feeling revealed in its naïve form, the feeling that the contest is vital, if the well-being of the state is to continue, we should think about the original meaning of *ostracism*: as, for example, expressed by the Ephesians at the banning of Hermodor. 'Amongst us, nobody should be the best; but if somebody is, let him be somewhere else, with other people.'¹³ For why should nobody be the best? Because with that, the contest would dry up and the permanent basis of life in the Hellenic state would be endangered. Later, ostracism acquires a different relation to the contest: it is used when there is the obvious danger that one of the great contending politicians and party leaders might feel driven, in the heat of battle, to use harmful and destructive means and to conduct dangerous *coups d'états*. The original function of this strange institution is, however, not as a safety valve but as a stimulant: the preeminent individual is removed to renew the tournament of forces: a thought that is hostile to the 'exclusivity' of genius in the modern sense, but assumes that there are always *several* geniuses to incite each other to action, just as they keep each other within certain limits, too. That is the kernel of the Hellenic idea of competition: it loathes a monopoly of predominance and fears the dangers of this, it desires, as *protective measure* against genius – a second genius.

Hellenic popular teaching commands that every talent must develop through a struggle: whereas modern educators fear nothing more than the unleashing of so-called ambition. Here, selfishness is feared as 'evil as such' – except by the Jesuits, who think like the ancients in this and probably, for that reason, may be the most effective educators of our times. They seem to believe that selfishness, i.e. the individual, is simply the most powerful *agens*, obtaining its character of 'good' and 'evil' essentially from the aims towards which it strives. But for the ancients, the aim of agonistic education was the well-being of the whole, of state society [*der staatlichen Gesellschaft*]. For example, every Athenian was to develop

¹¹ Thucydides I. 90ff.

¹² Plutarch, 'Life of Pericles', ch. 8.

¹³ Heraclitus, Fragment 121.

himself, through the contest, to the degree to which this self was of most use to Athens and would cause least damage. It was not a boundless and indeterminate ambition like most modern ambition: the youth thought of the good of his native city when he ran a race or threw or sang; he wanted to increase its reputation through his own; it was to the city’s gods that he dedicated the wreaths which the umpires placed on his head in honour. From childhood, every Greek felt the burning desire within him to be an instrument of bringing salvation to his city in the contest between cities: in this, his selfishness was lit, as well as curbed and restricted. For that reason, the individuals in antiquity were freer, because their aims were nearer and easier to achieve. Modern man, on the other hand, is crossed everywhere by infinity, like swift-footed Achilles in the parable of Zeno of Elea: infinity impedes him, he cannot even overtake the tortoise.

But as the youths to be educated were brought up competing with one another, their educators in their turn were in rivalry with each other. Full of mistrust and jealousy, the great music masters Pindar and Simonides took their places next to each other; the sophist, the advanced teacher of antiquity, met his fellow sophist in contest; even the most general way of teaching, through drama, was only brought to the people in the form of an immense struggle of great musicians and dramatists. How wonderful! ‘Even the artist has a grudge against the artist!’. And modern man fears nothing so much in an artist as personal belligerence, whilst the Greek knows the artist *only in personal struggle*. Where modern man senses the weakness of a work of art, there the Hellene looks for the source of its greatest strength! What, for example, is of particular artistic importance in Plato’s dialogues is mostly the result of a competition with the art of the orators, the sophists, the dramatists of his time, invented for the purpose of his finally being able to say: ‘Look: I, too, can do what my great rivals can do; yes, I can do it better than them. No Protagoras has written myths as beautiful as mine, no dramatist has written such a lively and fascinating whole as the *Symposium*, no orator has composed such speeches as I present in the *Gorgias* – and now I reject all of that and condemn all imitative art! Only the contest made me a poet, sophist and orator!’ What a problem reveals itself to us when we enquire about the relationship of the contest to the conception of the work of art! –

On the other hand, if we take away the contest from Greek life, we gaze immediately into that pre-Homeric abyss of a gruesome savagery of hatred and pleasure in destruction. Unfortunately, this phenomenon appears quite often when a great figure was suddenly withdrawn from the

contest through an immensely glorious deed and was *hors de concours*¹⁴ in his own judgment and that of his fellow citizens. Almost without exception the effect is terrible; and if we usually draw the conclusion from these effects that the Greek was unable to bear fame and fortune: we should, perhaps, say more exactly that he was not able to bear fame without further competition or fortune at the end of the contest. There is no clearer example than the ultimate fate of Miltiades.¹⁵ Placed on a lonely pinnacle and carried far beyond every fellow competitor through his incomparable success at Marathon: he feels a base lust for vengeance awaken in him against a citizen of Para with whom he had a quarrel long ago. To satisfy this lust, he misuses his name, the state's money and civic honour, and disgraces himself. Conscious of failure, he resorts to unworthy machinations. He enters into a secret and godless relationship with Timo, priestess of Demeter, and at night enters the sacred temple from which every man was excluded. When he has jumped over the wall and is approaching the shrine of the goddess, he is suddenly overwhelmed by a terrible, panic-stricken dread: almost collapsing and unconscious, he feels himself driven back and, jumping back over the wall, he falls down, paralysed and badly injured. The siege must be lifted, the people's court awaits him, and a disgraceful death stamps its seal on the glorious heroic career to darken it for all posterity. After the battle of Marathon he became the victim of the envy of the gods. And this divine envy flares up when it sees a man without any other competitor, without an opponent, at the lonely height of fame. He only has the gods near him now – and for that reason he has them against him. But these entice him into an act of hubris, and he collapses under it.

Let us also mention that even the finest Greek states perish in the same way as Miltiades when they, too, through merit and fortune have progressed from the racecourse to the temple of Nike. Both Athens, which had destroyed the independence of her allies and severely punished the rebellions of those subjected to her, and Sparta, which, after the battle of Aegospotamoi,¹⁶ made her superior strength felt over Hellas in an even harder and crueller fashion, brought about their own ruin, after the example of Miltiades, through acts of hubris. This proves that without envy, jealousy and ambition in the contest, the Hellenic state, like

¹⁴ Out of the competition or contest.

¹⁵ Herodotus VI 133–6.

¹⁶ Decisive Athenian naval defeat at the hands of the Spartans in 405 BC. Cf. Xenophon, *Hellenica* II. 1.10–32.

Hellenic man, deteriorates. It becomes evil and cruel, it becomes vengeful and godless, in short, it becomes 'pre-Homeric' – it then only takes a panicky fright to make it fall and shatter. Sparta and Athens surrender to the Persians like Themistocles¹⁶ and Alcibiades¹⁷ did; they betray the Hellenic after they have given up the finest Hellenic principle, the contest: and Alexander, the rough copy and abbreviation of Greek history, now invents the standard-issue Hellene and so-called 'Hellenism'. –

¹⁶ Thucydides I. 135ff.

¹⁷ Thucydides VIII. 45ff.